

## Homosexual City, Homophobic Banlieue?

Éric Fassin and translated by Christina Mitrakos

*Is homophobia prevalent in social housing projects? Is sexual orientation the new divide between civilizations? Éric Fassin shows how condemning sexism in the banlieues not only reinforces the opposition between “us” and “them,” but also contributes to fueling it.*

In 2009, two books on homosexuality in the *banlieues*<sup>1</sup> were published. The subtitle of *Homo-ghetto*<sup>2</sup>, written by Franck Chaumont, and published on October 1<sup>st</sup>, describes “gays and lesbians in the projects” as “the stowaways of the Republic.” In December, *Un homo dans la cité (Gay in the Projects)*<sup>3</sup>, a personal account by Brahim Naït-Balk, written with Florence Assouline, was blunt in its depiction of “the descent into hell then the liberation of a homosexual with a North African cultural background.” Meanwhile, a scandal that has received a lot of media coverage has fed into this narrative. On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, a soccer club, *Bebel Créteil*, indeed told the *Paris Foot Gay* that it refused to play the scheduled game: “Sorry, because of your team’s name and in accordance with the principles of our team, a team of practicing Muslims, we cannot play against you.”

*Bebel Créteil’s* excuses and the sanctions imposed on the club, which broke-up after it was excluded from the league, didn’t put an end to this scandal. The stand taken by Franck Chaumont, on November 19 in [lemonde.fr](http://lemonde.fr), made this event emblematic of the necessary struggle “against homophobia in the ghettos.” “Their names are Nadir, Sébastien, Cynthia, Dialo or Nadia. They are black, white or *beurs*<sup>4</sup>, [...] All live in a neighborhood not yet touched by modernity. [...] In these housing projects where hyper-masculinity and machismo are the ultimate values, homosexuality is considered deviant and should be rejected and banned: gays are weak-willed people that should be excluded or punished!” The connections are clear: Brahim Naït-Balk turns out to be *Paris Foot Gay’s* trainer; and the acknowledgements, at the end of the book, are addressed to Franck Chaumont, who, in his own book had written about him: “He is the exception that proves the rule: a homosexual in the *banlieue* who is open about his sexual orientation” (p. 85).

It is not only about homophobia, but also about sexism. The same themes and rhetoric also came up, a year later, in “*La cité du mâle*<sup>5</sup>,” directed by Cathy Sanchez and produced by Daniel Leconte: this *Arte*<sup>6</sup> documentary that was scrapped from the programmed date, August 31, 2010 and broadcast on September 29, takes us back to *Vitry*, where Sohane was burned in a garbage room. The evening’s theme (entitled: “Women, why such hate?”) is about male chauvinistic violence against women in the social housing projects- at the risk of portraying this area as a cultural

<sup>1</sup> Translator’s notes: *banlieue* is French for suburbs but in this article it refers to troubled suburban communities, usually social housing projects, with high unemployment and a high percentage of residents of foreign origins.

<sup>2</sup> Chaumont, Franck. 2009. *Homo-ghetto. Gays et lesbiennes dans les cités: les clandestins de la République*, Paris: Le Cherche midi.

<sup>3</sup> Naït-Balk, Brahim. 2009. *Un homo dans la cité. La descente aux enfers puis la libération d’un homosexuel de culture maghrébine*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy.

<sup>4</sup> A colloquial term, which refers to native-born French people whose parents are from North Africa.

<sup>5</sup> Translator’s notes: Cité refers to the projects and “male” is a play on words, it could be either male or evil (*mal*).

<sup>6</sup> A French and German TV channel.

caricature. According to the journalist who led the investigation, Nabila Laïb (presented by the channel like a simple “neighborhood contact,” maybe because she is from the neighborhood<sup>7</sup>), the documentary indeed focused on the “youth” who (over-) played the disturbing roles that were assigned to them ahead of time in the director’s script.

The death of Sohane in October 2002 coincided with the publication of what would become a best seller: *Dans l’enfer des tournantes* (In Gang Rape Hell), by Samira Bellil<sup>8</sup>. Her frightening account fueled the horrified media’s fascination with gang rape, using a term borrowed from the language of the *banlieue*, that had recently entered the common language with the film, *La squale* in 2000. This tragic event was also the point of departure for “*La marche des femme des cités*” (The March of Women from the Projects) on March 8, 2003, who were triumphantly received in Paris by the Prime Minister. This was followed up on July 14<sup>th</sup> with official state recognition, through a photographic exhibition of “*Les Mariannes<sup>9</sup> d’aujourd’hui*” (The Mariannes of Today<sup>10</sup>) at the gates of the National Assembly. This media and political success secured the launching of the organization, *Ni putes ni soumises* (Neither Whores nor Submissive), led by Fadela Amara, as well as a book with the same title that came out in September.

The back cover of *Homo-ghetto* shows the author as an heir to these events: “journalist at Beur FM then RFI<sup>11</sup>”, Franck Chaumont, was in charge of “the communication of the movement *Ni putes ni soumises* until 2007.” Homophobia logically results from sexism: it was in 2003 during the *Marche* that he became aware of this, when some boys privately confessed, “how important this denunciation was for them, homosexuals, victims of sexism just like girls” (p. 9). In fact, in the ghettoized projects, “excluded from social progress” and, failing to be recognized, “the boys in the midst of a serious identity crisis have masculinity as their only recourse” (p. 176). It is also, for that matter, why logically lesbians would be less stigmatized by the pervasive virility.

### **Sex: The new clash of civilizations?**

The story by the “homosexual with a North African cultural background” thus compounds the investigation by the journalist who was inspired by the mission of *Ni putes ni soumises*. From the sexist housing projects to the homophobic housing projects, a landscape is being drawn where the border between the city and the *banlieue* separates “them” from “us:” it is being expressed mainly in terms of gender and sexuality, in the name of what I’ve suggested to call “sexual democracy.” The freedom of women and the equality of the sexes, and possibly all kinds of sexuality, would be the defining trait of our identity, in contrast to the racialized “others,” culturally foreign to these values emblematic of modernity.

Such rhetoric is not unique to France: it has become the dominant frame to understand international relations in the 2000’s. The “clash of civilizations” thesis by Samuel Huntington in 1993, that caused a big stir after the Cold War, was recast ten years later, after September 11, by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, as a “sexual conflict of civilizations,” a war of values where the status of women is the main issue and Islamism, the main enemy. If we believe Laura Bush, the wife of American president, George Bush, American troops had to be sent to Afghanistan in order to stop the oppression of women.

Europe, however, puts forward a particular variation of this rhetoric: indeed, in a context marked by increasing immigration restrictions more than by a war on terror, it is not about exporting “our” values, but about preserving them. In other words, the dividing line between “them” and “us” on

<sup>7</sup> <http://television.telerama.fr/television/nabila-laib-raconte-les-embrouilles-de-la-cite-du-male,59910.php?nocache=1284089039610.7>

<sup>8</sup> Bellil, Samira. 2003. *Dans l’enfer des tournantes*, Paris: Éditions Denoël (collection Folio Documents).

<sup>9</sup> Marianne is the name of the symbolic woman who represents the French Republic.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/evenements/mariannes.asp>

<sup>11</sup> Radio stations.

this side of the Atlantic appears like an inner border that divides the space of European nations according to cultural origins: sexual democracy would draw the limit between the city and the *banlieue*. Thus, let's not confine the controversy around the Islamic veil or sexual violence to France, because of its republican appeal: all over Europe today, the difference between "us" and "them" can be summed up by how people are believed to behave toward women.

It is certainly less clear whether the treatment of homosexuals can play a similar role. In Holland, in the 2000's, equality based on sexual orientation became a main element of national identity, to the extent that it was part of the Dutch integration tests imposed on non-European immigrants. Same-sex marriage became an option for couples, precisely, in 2001. Even before Muslim misogyny was denounced by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and later by Geert Wilders, popular Islamophobia was embodied by Pim Fortuyn, in the name of ostentatious homosexuality: if he rejected the imams, he liked to say, it was to better enjoy Moroccan boys...

Nevertheless, the situation in France is not the same: during the 2007 presidential election campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy, justified his national identity policies in the name of equality for women- and not for homosexuals. If he invoked the right of women to get an abortion as proof of women's equality in French culture, he recoiled on issues of same-sex marriage and adoption. The candidate justified this position with difficulty: "I was born a heterosexual"... In short, sexual democracy in France does not extend to homosexuality, as opposed to Holland.

The fact remains, even though equal rights are not always a priority in France, homophobia is nevertheless redirected toward the "others"- "in their country," abroad (with Rama Yade's campaign for decriminalizing homosexuality), or even, if it is "at home," it is only among "them" (in the racialized *banlieue*). At a time when increasing xenophobia and racism haunt policies in France and Europe, the stakes of such a policy are clear. "In the end," concluded Brahim Naït-Balk, "I have suffered more from homophobic hatred by people who share my background, than from anti-Arab racism" (p. 8). The homophobia of the "others" can contribute to forgetting, excusing or even justifying the racism of which they themselves are victim of: it is because the "others" are thought of as refusing the values of sexual democracy that they exclude themselves from being full-fledged citizens.

### **From the "homosexual ghetto" to the "homophobic ghetto"**

Regardless of such exploitation and the need to avoid stigmatizing the projects even more, the reality of sexism or homophobia in the *banlieue* shouldn't be denied. On the other hand, it is important to understand how much of what is shown, in the personal account as well as in the investigation and beyond in the media, is constrained not only by the empirical reality, but also by a rhetorical prism that determines how it is received. And yet, caricature is no less problematic than denial.

Thus, Brahim Naït-Balk's reasoning is two-fold: He hopes to "break the taboo on homosexuality that still dominates, particularly in North African milieus, where it is denied, but also," he adds "in the western mind, where it is preferred to be kept hidden." (p. 9-10). However, it is the first part of this reasoning that is the most often remembered- in other words, the title of the book (the projects) and its subtitle (North African culture). This was the situation during the controversy that opposed *Bebel Créteil* to his club, the *Paris Foot Gay*. Everything then appeared in the media, as if Islam was the only cause of homophobia. And yet, everyone knows how common sexism and homophobia are in the world of soccer- without even mentioning the rampant racism.

At the same time, the press is amused by Louis Nicollin's repeated use of inappropriate language. Indeed, on October 31, 2009, the president of the Montpellier club, after a game against the team from Auxerre called its captain a "little faggot," before phoning him to apologize: "we're men, not sissies." But the connection is not made. In fact, unlike *Bebel Créteil*, "Loulou" (his nickname) was not only not punished, but nobody invoked "white culture" to make him aware of his sexism and his

homophobia. He also defended the remarks made by Georges Frêche on the large number of Black men in soccer: “And them, if you are going to play with whatever team and there are only whites, they’ll say too many whites!” In short, “they are more racist than we are.”

The *banlieue* thus, doesn’t have a monopoly on sexism and homophobia. However, can we say, that these prejudices are more pronounced there, than elsewhere, or are they more openly displayed there? In any case, it is worth finding out the causes of this reality, whether it is exacerbated or more explicit. Franck Chaumont’s book offers an explanation, hardly picked up by the media, who is more fond of the details of homophobia in the *banlieue*, than of homosexual racism against gays in the projects. And yet, “rejected by their entourage at the heart of their ‘ghetto,’ the gays in the projects don’t fit into the ‘homosexual community’ that thrives in Paris and elsewhere” (p. 184).

Thus, “Majid prefers boys to girls, but he hates queers” (p. 20). Has this young man internalized the homophobia that he suffered from in the projects? Very likely. In fact, “the liberated relationship the ‘Gaulois’ have to homosexuality shocks him” (p. 22). But there’s more: if Majid “entertains an ambiguous relationship with White people” it is because he knows he represents a “hoodlum” fantasy for them: “we are their fantasy, they dream of ‘having a gangbang’ (p. 22). Also, “In hip Paris bars in the *Marais*<sup>12</sup>, Nadir is asked if he is interested in ‘going to the basement’” (p. 184). Francois, a 40 year-old Parisian bobo who works in the luxury industry says, “when I’m with friends, I invite several [young ‘Rebeus’<sup>13</sup>] and we especially ask them to fuck us with their sweat suits on.” And he explains, “they are our opposite and that’s what turns us on” (p. 186).

Sexual exoticism thus feeds on racism which, in turn, feeds the homophobia of the objects of this racialized fantasy- whether they are homosexuals themselves or not, or whether they identify or not with this binary alternative. It should be clear by now: it is not enough to remember that homophobia also exists outside of the projects, whether it is crudely expressed, like in the world of soccer, or more euphemistically expressed, like in the academic world for example, or even alternately in both ways, in the world of politics. It is also a matter of understanding that homophobia in the projects can’t be compared to racism in a society as if they were two unrelated social facts. Certainly, the former sometimes justifies the latter; but at the same time the latter fuels the former.

The figure of the “ghetto” can serve here as a point of reference. In the 1990’s, the “gay ghetto” was denounced and the gay community was called on to be discrete. The republican rhetoric, in the name of universalism, was opposed to any “American-style” communitarianism. In the 2000’s we get a sense that the situation has reversed; we still criticize the “ghetto,” but it designates the projects and no longer the *Marais*. And now the *banlieue* is criticized for forcing homosexuals to remain discrete: these “stowaways of the Republic” should be freed from their home community in order to blossom in the gay community, to which they’d be better off belonging to.

Still largely not thought of, is less the opposition between the two, than their relationship, in other words, between the “homo-ghetto,” these projects that are today portrayed as homophobic prisons, and the “ghetto homo,” that in no way escapes the thinking about race that pervades society (and sexuality): they mirror each other. The culturalism ascribed to the *banlieue* thus contributes to the problem that it claims to describe and denounce. Thus, we ought not ignore homophobia in the projects, but describe it without reinforcing it, by avoiding the traps of a rhetoric that in opposing “them” to “us,” forces the former to define themselves in opposition to the latter, as if reacting to the clear conscience of a sexual democracy, not devoid of racism, where the expectation is alas, the most often, imposed only on the others.

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<sup>12</sup> Translator’s note: the most famous gay neighborhood in Paris.

<sup>13</sup> Translator’s note: *Rebeu* is *verlan* or reverse for *beur*. See footnote above.

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**To go further :**

Éric Fassin's blog : <http://www.mediapart.fr/club/blog/eric-fassin>

Fabre, Clarisse and Fassin, Éric. 2004. *Liberté, égalité, sexualités. Actualité politique des questions sexuelles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Paris : published by 10/18.

Fassin, Éric. 2008. *L'inversion de la question homosexuelle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Paris : Éditions Amsterdam.

Fassin, Éric. 2009. *Le sexe politique. Genre et sexualité au miroir transatlantique*, Paris : published by EHESS.

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